

## Strategies for online teaching The pedagogical potential of film taboo language in ESL classes

Patrizia Giampieri  
University of Camerino (Italy)  
University of Malta (Malta)

Received: 02/01/2022

Accepted: 18/07/2022

### *Abstract*

Learning a second language (L2) by watching films is argued to be enjoyable (Sherman, 2003: 14; Zabalbeascoa et al. 2012; Donaghy, 2014; Giampieri, 2018c: 402), stimulating and pedagogical. The taboo words of an L2 are also claimed to be of interest to L2 learners (Sherman, 2003; Gilmore, 2010; Díaz-Cintas, 2012; Donaghy, 2014) and useful to become acquainted with for sociocultural reasons. Awareness of taboo words can, in fact, be considered important in an L2 learner's *repertoire*. This paper is aimed at exploring whether or not being exposed to taboo words in foreign-language learning can be positive. In particular, the activity focuses on American film sequences containing swearwords in order to raise L2 awareness. On the basis of the paper's findings, it is possible to speculate that the participants (undergraduate students) identified certain new words and understood how taboo words are changed, or adapted, in dubbing.

### *Key Words*

Second language learning, Taboo words, Film censorship, Film dialogues, ESL, Distance ESL classes



### *1. Introduction*

#### *1.1 What is taboo language*

According to Wardhaugh (2006), taboo language is defined as words which should not be uttered because they cause anxiety, embarrassment or shame

(Wardhaugh, 2006: 239). Taboos revolve around a varied range of topics, such as bodily functions, sex, death, politics and religion (Allan and Burrige, 2006; Wardhaugh, 2006: 239). People break taboos by calling on their freedom of speech, or in order to draw attention to themselves and be provocative (Wardhaugh, 2006: 239). Other reasons for challenging taboos can be to show how irrational and unjustified they are (Wardhaugh, 2006: 239), or support the speaker's emotions, in particular anger and frustration (Jay and Janschewitz, 2008: 267). In certain critical situations, in fact, non-taboo expressions would not convey the same feelings (Mercury, 1995: 28). Also, swearing is context related and variables such as the speaker-listener relationship, their social status (Ávila-Cabrera, 2015: 387) and age can influence the types of words uttered, making them taboo- or non-taboo related (Jay and Janschewitz, 2008: 272).

According to Avila-Cabrera (2016), swearwords are a type of offensive language which can be divided into three categories: abusive utterances (such as cursing and insults), expletives (such as exclamatory swearwords), and invectives (such as subtle insults). In this way, swearwords can be considered a category of taboo words.

Taboo topics vary across languages and change over time. Allan and Burrige (2006) divide taboo topics into several categories, such as taking the name of God in vain, damning and wishing death or disease, disability or madness; referring to excretion and urination; sex, and race (see also Giampieri, 2020). What was considered unutterable in the past may be acceptable at present day (see the surveys carried out by Tartamella, 2009; Synovate, 2010 and OfCom, 2016). For example, the use of “damn” in the film *Gone with the Wind* (1939) was considered outrageous at the time the film was made (Wardhaug, 2006: 239).

Also, some taboo words were considered “forbidden” (Allan and Burrige, 2006) and some “dirty words” could not be uttered on TV (Marcus, 1979; Sullivan, 2010; Swartztrauber and Pai, 2018: online). Nowadays, they are frequently used in many American films (Cressman et al., 2009; Byrnes, 2014).

### *1.2 Films exposure and L2 learning*

Watching films for second language (L2) learning purposes has been advocated by several scholars (Sherman, 2003; Gilmore, 2010; Díaz-Cintas, 2012; Talaván, 2013; Donaghy, 2014; Parisi and Andon, 2016; Giampieri, 2018c and 2019; Herrero and Vanderschelden 2019; McLoughlin et al., 2020; Bolaños-García-Escribano et al., 2021). Film language, in fact, is claimed to be very close to

authentic spoken language (Sherman, 2003: 13). Albeit film language can be said to be scripted, it may be considered natural to the extent that it is neither graded, nor intended for ESL (English as a Second Language) learners, as it is addressed to a native speaking audience (ibid.). Some film producers also prefer unscripted dialogues (Mottram, 2010; Kermode, 2014) and rely on improvisation to make acting more realistic (Gilmore, 2010). For these reasons, films have become an opportunity for L2 learners to be exposed to real-life discourse (Donaghy, 2014). In this respect, the literature claims that authentic materials are important to develop L2 skills (Tomlinson, 2011; Maley and Tomlinson, 2017). Exposing L2 learners to film language can be deemed enjoyable and motivating (Sherman, 2003: 14; Donaghy, 2014; Giampieri, 2018c: 402). Scholars argue, in fact, that “learners are highly motivated by authentic materials such as films” (Gilmore, 2010: 117). By watching films, their interest is raised and language learning is likely to occur. As Tomlinson (2011) posits “Impact is achieved when materials have a noticeable effect on learners, that is when the learners’ curiosity, interest and attention are attracted. If this is achieved, there is a better chance that some of the language in the materials will be taken in for processing” (Tomlinson, 2011: 8).

The literature also argues that learning a second language is more like “growing a garden than building a wall” (Nunan, 2012: 233), because learners do not learn things systematically, or “one item at a time, but numerous things simultaneously (and imperfectly)” (Nunan, 2012: 233).

### *1.3 Taboo language and language learning*

L2 learners are interested in learning taboo words and in knowing how and when to use L2 swearwords (Jay, 2000: 154-155; Horan, 2013: 289; Finn, 2017; Irwin, 2019). If L2 learners are exposed to taboo words, it is likely that they will feel even more engaged in L2 learning, and motivation can boost their linguistic skills. In turn, scholars remark how useful taboo words are for L2 learners (Mercury, 1995; Horan, 2013; Andang and Bram, 2018). Negative emotions are, in fact, often manifested by swearing (Jay and Janschewitz, 2008; Horan, 2013). By becoming acquainted with taboo words, learners may be aware of what is considered obscene in an L2 (Mercury, 1995; Jay, 2000) and would know how to address it (Andang and Bram, 2018). As a matter of fact, learning a foreign language means understanding its cultural aspects, either positive or negative (Andang and Bram, 2018).

Swearwords are very important from both a sociolinguistic and sociocultural point of view (Mercury, 1995: 28; Jay and Janschewitz, 2008). Mercury (1995) claims that “taboo language could prove to be pedagogically useful” (ibid.: 29) and awareness of taboo words may be considered important in an L2 learner’s *repertoire* (Horan, 2013: 283). It is manifest that cursing in a first language is more emotional than in a foreign language (Dewaele, 2004; Colbeck and Bowers, 2012), but developing L2 skills by learning taboo words would make word learning more complete and easier to remember. A case in point is the example reported by Cook (2016: 64) that a “swear word said accidentally when the teacher drops the tape-recorder, is likely to be remembered by the students forever even if it is never repeated”.

Also, Ávila-Cabrera and Rodríguez Arancón (2018) conducted a study with undergraduate students performing subtitling and dubbing tasks and they showed that students were more daring in the translation of swearwords when using an L2. Valdeón (2020) carried out a study in which students dubbed British and American TV programs into Spanish. His hypothesis was that Spanish dubs and subs tend to intensify the swearwords uttered.

The latest advancements in distance-teaching technologies have made it possible to plan and conceive online lessons also in AVT (Bolaños-García-Escribano et al., 2021). For this reason, this paper focuses on a virtual classroom observation study dedicated to teaching English as an L2 by exposing participants to L2/L1 film sequences containing taboo words. In particular, this paper tries to ascertain whether it is possible to raise L2 learners’ knowledge even incidentally or implicitly. Implicit knowledge is procedural learning which is held unconsciously (Ellis, 2005: 213). In implicit learning “learners remain unaware of the learning that has taken place” (Ellis, 2009: 3) and they “cannot verbalize what they have learned” (ibid.).

## *2. Research question*

It is understood that exposing L2 learners to film language can be considered beneficial and that L2 taboo language may be perceived as enjoyable. Hence, this paper aims at answering the following research questions: how can a distant lesson on the taboo language of American films and their dubbed versions in Italian help L2 learners feel engaged and, eventually, raise their awareness of L2

taboo language? Can L2 learners notice or grasp new words, even incidentally or implicitly?

### *3. Participants and Methods*

#### *3.1 Participants*

In order to address the research question, ESL distant lessons took place by involving sixty-five students. Before each lesson, the participants quickly introduced themselves and described their educational background and their interest in films. Every student had a secondary school certificate with different school backgrounds; some came from technical, scientific, or accounting schools, others had undertaken language, artistic or classical studies. They all shared a passion for watching films, but they enjoyed different genres. For example, some students preferred action films, others thrillers or romance. None of them watched American or British films in English, which was their L2, whereas Italian was the main first language among them. Those who were not Italian native speakers were either Romanians or Albanians, and had completed secondary school education in Italy. Hence, their level of Italian was near native. As far as their English knowledge is concerned, the majority had a self-assessed level of English equal to A2/B1 as per the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Approximately a dozen declared to have a B1 level.

In order to let every participant follow the lesson, Italian was the medium of instruction of the workshops. During the lessons, the participants watched sequences of American films and the Italian translations. They also read the film excerpt actual scripts. They were prompted to listen to the original and dubbed film versions, read the film excerpt scripts and participate in the lesson by discussing dubbing strategies and censorship, when relevant.

The lessons were organised in a series of 2-hour webinars. They were delivered online via the Zoom platform over a period of 4-5 months (from October 2020 to March 2021). The students were divided into groups of 10-15 and each student could only participate once.

The 2-hour online lessons took place within state-mandatory courses for apprentices (18 to 30 years old), where several modules are taught, such as accounting, civil rights, English as a second language, foundations of labour psychology, communication, business organization, and others. Generally,

apprentices attending state courses are claimed to be demotivated, as they feel that lessons are boring and useless (Soprano, 2013; Bardazzi, 2014; Ravotti, 2014: 39ff). Ravotti (2014) reports the opinions of apprentices who followed state-mandatory training. In particular, one stated that *[c]onsidero il corso di apprendistato inutile per lo scopo che si propone di raggiungere* (back translation: “I consider apprentice training useless for the purposes it is aimed at serving”, *ibid.*: 39). Another apprentice reported: *alla fine della giornata, mi sembra di non aver aggiunto niente di soddisfacente al mio bagaglio* (back translation: “at the end of the day, I feel I have not added anything satisfactory to my background”, *ibid.*: 44). This paper is aimed at challenging these feelings.

### 3.2 Methods

The film excerpts were shared from the lecturer’s screen via Zoom. The film sequences were no longer than a few minutes and had been selected on the basis of the taboo language and swearwords they contain as well as on the basis of the dubbing strategies. Students were exposed to the excerpts in English first, then in Italian. The English film sequences were subtitled in English and the participants watched them twice in order to foster noticing. They were also provided with the English scripts, which had been sent via email beforehand. After watching each sequence in English, the participants read the sequence script before being discussed as a group. In this way, difficult dialogues or challenging words could be clarified. Afterwards, the Italian version of each film sequence was watched. Sometimes the film script was analysed once more after watching the Italian dubbing. Thanks to the script, the participants noted the taboo language in the original language, identified swearwords by themselves (as these had not been highlighted or italicised), and verified whether (and how) taboo language was rendered in Italian. Dialogues and open discussions followed each film sequence, where the participants expressed their impressions on the language rendering, modifications and/or adaptation (if any).

At the end of each session, the participants completed a multi-function questionnaire (see Appendix 1). The questionnaire was delivered via Google Modules and it was aimed at helping the participants express their level of satisfaction with the online trial lesson. To this aim, they were prompted to give a 1-5 marks (where 1 was the lowest and 5 the highest) to a series of statements on the content of the lesson, their engagement, their opinion on the lesson, etc. They also rated their interest in the topic addressed; their participation in the

lesson, and they asserted what they felt they would “bring home” (i.e., what they thought they gained, or could remember, from the lesson).

The next pages focus on the film excerpts. The film dialogues are examined in both the original and dubbed versions. The participants’ comments on the film extracts and on the curse language are reported together with the censorship strategies that the participants noticed, if any.

#### *4. Analysis*

##### *4.1 The film excerpts*

As anticipated, the films are American and range from action films to comedies and youth films. Most of the films are rated R (restricted to under 17s) in the country of origin, whereas they are rated G (general public) in Italy. The participants were warned that a certain degree of censorship was expected in view of the different film rating.

The excerpts are sourced from the following films: *The Gauntlet* (1977) (Clint Eastwood); *Who’s your Daddy* (2004) (Andy Fickman); *Gran Torino* (2008) (Clint Eastwood); *Ted* (2012) (Seth MacFarlane), and *Ted 2* (2015) (Seth MacFarlane). Table 1 below reports the first excerpt.

Context: Ben, a policeman, is escorting a witness, a prostitute, from Las Vegas to Phoenix. Soon he realizes that she is sought after by the police.

Original version	Italian dubbing
<p>Ben: Let's go.  Policeman: You, in the house! Come out with your hands up! We got the house surrounded. Throw out your guns. Bring the girl.  Ben: <u>Fuck me!</u> Come on, let's go. Come on, <u>goddamn it!</u> They've got a whole army out there.  Policeman: You've got thirty seconds.</p>	<p><i>Ben: Sei pronta?</i>  <i>Policeman: Fate attenzione. Venite fuori con le mani in alto. La casa è circondata. Buttate via le armi. Prima la ragazza.</i>  <i>Ben: <u>Ma questi sono matti.</u> Svelta esci. Ti vuoi sbrigare, sì o no? C'è un esercito qui fuori.</i>  <i>Policeman: Hai trenta secondi.</i></p> <p>[Back translation:  Ben: Are you ready?  Policeman: Watch out. Come out with your hands up. The house is surrounded. Throw out your guns. The girl first.  Ben: <u>They're all crazy.</u> Come on, get out. Hurry up, <u>will you?</u> There's a whole army out there.  Policeman: You've got thirty seconds.]</p>

Table 1. *The Gauntlet* (1977)

The participants clearly noticed two swearwords in the English sequence (i.e., “fuck me” and “goddamn it”), but none in Italian. It was explained to them that in the 1970s, censorship was very pervasive in Italy. Furthermore, at that time, blasphemies were considered a crime. Only recently have they been de-penalized and subject only to a fine (see The Italian law n. 205 of 25 June 1999 named “*Delega al Governo per la depenalizzazione dei reati minori e modifiche al sistema penale e tributario*”). Nonetheless, blasphemies are still socially inappropriate and rank highly in the scale of taboo words in Italian (Tartamella, 2009: 122).

In the next film excerpt, before watching the Italian version, the participants were prompted to suggest which words could be currently censored according to their opinion (see Table 2).

Context: Ben is in a restaurant. He has just finished his beer and is ready to catch a flight.



Strategies for online teaching

Original version	Italian dubbing
<p>Waitress: Okey dokey, sir. Here you are, just what you ordered. Now, how about another one?</p> <p>Ben: Not this time.</p> <p>Waitress: You sure?</p> <p>Ben: I've got a plane to catch.</p> <p>Waitress: <u>Holy gee!</u> No way you'd get me on a plane. I mean, not after the airline pilots I've <u>dated</u>. I wouldn't let those <u>assholes</u> drive my car.</p>	<p><i>Waitress: Eccola servita. È questo quello che ha ordinato, vero? Vuole che le porti qualcos'altro?</i></p> <p><i>Ben: No grazie, va bene così.</i></p> <p><i>Waitress: Sicuro?</i></p> <p><i>Ben: Devo partire in aereo.</i></p> <p><i>Waitress: <u>Mamma mia!</u> E chi ci mette piede su un aeroplano. Dopo aver conosciuto piloti di tutte le linee, le assicuro che io non <u>li</u> lascerei guidare neanche un carretto.</i></p> <p>[Back translation:  Waitress: Here you are. This is what you ordered, right? Would you like something else?  Ben: No, thank you. I'm fine.  Waitress: Sure?  Ben: I must catch a flight.  Waitress: <u>Mama mia!</u> I'd never put my foot on a plane. After <u>meeting</u> pilots from all airlines, I wouldn't let <u>them</u> drive even a handcart, I tell you.]</p>

Table 2. *The Gauntlet* (1977)

After watching the English excerpt, the participants were asked to find the words which could be omitted or heavily “manipulated” (Zanotti, 2012; Giampieri, 2018a: 100; Giampieri, 2020) by censorship. They rightly proposed *assholes*, but overlooked “holy gee” and “dated”. The word “Gee” is taboo related. It is a euphemistic avoidance of saying “Jesus”, which can be considered blasphemous in certain English-speaking environments. In the dubbed version, “Holy gee” was turned into the Italian utterance *mama mia!* The verb *to date* (whose meaning is close to “flirt with”) was changed into “to meet”. The participants were puzzled and did not expect such subtleties. It was remarked that censorship in the 1970s in Italy was particularly severe.

The following excerpt reports an interesting example of censorship used to address drug abuse (Table 3).

Context: Murphy (Marty in the Italian version) is reciting a long tong-twister, when his friend Chris tells him he forgot to mention something.

Original version	Italian dubbing
<p>Chris: You forgot “chronic”.</p> <p>Murphy: Bite me! Oh chronic. I’m such a <u>lame-ass</u>.</p> <p>Chris: No, it’s really good. Not even a <u>real stoner</u> could have pulled that off.</p> <p>Murphy: Thanks man. I take my <u>marijuana burby</u> seriously.</p>	<p><i>Chris: Hai dimenticato la C.</i></p> <p><i>Marty: Idiota! Oh, come ho fatto, <u>idiota!</u></i></p> <p><i>Chris: Non è vero, sei stato bravissimo.</i></p> <p><i><u>Nessuno</u> avrebbe potuto fare meglio.</i></p> <p><i>Martin: Grazie amico, prendo questo <u>esercizio</u> molto sul serio.</i></p> <p>[Back translation:  Chris: You forgot C.  Marty: Idiot! How could I? <u>Idiot!</u>  Chris: It’s not true, you were very good.  <u>Nobody</u> could have done any better.  Martin: Thank you, my friend. I take this <u>exercise</u> very seriously.]</p>

Table 3. *Who’s Your Daddy?* (2004)

Before watching the Italian dubbing, the participants asked for the meaning of “lame-ass” and “burby”. They were told that “stoner” is a person who takes drugs, in particular cannabis. Therefore, they mentioned that, probably, the words “stoner” and “marijuana” could be toned down. After watching the Italian sequence, they noticed that the light insult “lame-ass” was changed into a gentler *idiota*; the phrase “not even a real stoner” was censored and turned into *nessuno*, and “my marijuana burby” was lessened down to *questo esercizio*.

The participants were told that the reasons for censorship in the film *Who’s Your Daddy?* (2004) (Andy Fickman) probably lie in the fact that it was a youth film. In Italy, it was rated G and addressed to young adults (Zanotti, 2012; Giampieri, 2017a; Giampieri, 2020: 262); hence, the chances of omitting taboo language were very high.

The excerpt which follows was sourced from the film *Gran Torino* (2008) (Clint Eastwood). This sequence addresses insults and epithets.

Context: Walt, a former soldier, is teaching Tao, a Hmong boy, how real men behave. Tao is now entering an Italian barber shop and is greeting the barber. Walt is inside watching him.

Original version	Italian dubbing
<p>Tao: What's up, you old Italian <u>prick</u>?                      Barber: Get out of my shop before I blow your head off, you <u>goddamn dick smoker gook!</u>                      Walt: Jesus Christ. <u>Shit</u>. Take it easy. What the hell are you doing? Have you lost your mind?</p>	<p><i>Tao: Come stai, Italiano <u>di merda</u>?                      Barber: Esci dal mio negozio o ti faccio saltare la testa, <u>fottuto bocchinaro muso giallo!</u>                      Walt: Cristo Santo, oh <u>vazzo!</u> Tranquillo, tranquillo. Che diavolo stai facendo, sei <u>impazzito?</u></i></p> <p>[Back translation:                      Tao: How are you, <u>shitty</u> Italian?                      Barber: Get out of my shop or I will blow your head off, <u>fucked dick-sucker yellow muzzle!</u>                      Walt: Holy Christ. <u>Fuck</u> (literally: <u>Dick/Bollocks</u>). Calm down, calm down. What the hell are you doing. Are you out of your mind?]</p>

Table 4. *Gran Torino* (2008)

From this excerpt, the participants learnt that “gook” is a racial slur generally addressed to Asian people. In Italian, a common fixed translation has always been *muso giallo* (Filmer, 2011; Giampieri, 2017b: 261-262; Giampieri, 2020: 276). The participants found “dick smoker” quite bizarre, but they liked the way it was rendered in Italian. The blasphemy, instead, was translated as *fottuto*. This equivalent has long been used in audiovisual translation. Nonetheless, it has also been described by the literature as a form of “dubbese”; i.e., non-natural film language (Pavesi and Malinverno, 2000, pp.77–78; see also Pavesi, 2009). The participants realized that the verb *fottere* (literally “to hump”) and its derivatives are hardly ever used in Italian natural conversation. Nonetheless, they have been extensively used in film dubbing as a fixed translation of the lemma “fuck” (Pavesi and Malinverno, 2000: 77-78; Giampieri, 2017c: 77). This is probably the reason why the students did not notice the unnatural word *fottere* in the first place, as they had been repeatedly exposed to this kind of dubbing (see also Giampieri, 2018b: 37-38). This, however, remains at the level of speculation.

The participants also watched film excerpts from the film *Ted* (2012) (Seth MacFarlane). In this sequence, they had the possibility to notice how a blasphemy can be successfully turned into a scatological insult.

Context: Ted, a living teddy-bear, has been abducted and is now locked in a room with the abductor’s son.

Original version	Italian dubbing
Tony's son: Me and Ted are going to be best friends, daddy. Tony: Yes you are, my little chipmunk! Happy playtime. Ted: <u>Jesus f** Christ!</u>	<i>Tony's son: Io e Ted diventeremo amici, papà!</i> <i>Tony: Sì, è così mio piccolo chipmunk. Buon divertimento!</i> <i>Ted: <u>Sono nella merda!</u></i>  [Back translation: Tony's son: Me and Ted will become friends, dad! Tony: Yes, it is so, my little chipmunk. Have fun! Ted: <u>I'm in (deep) shit!</u> ]

Table 5. *Ted* (2012)

The participants appreciated the way the blasphemy was translated. As a matter of fact, they agreed that *sono nella merda* perfectly rendered the tense situation.

Also in *Ted 2* (2015) (Seth MacFarlane) the audiovisual translators succeeded in conveying the outrageousness of the majority of the taboo words, even though some censorship was applied to religious matters and expressions (see Giampieri, 2017c: 84) (Table 6).

Context: Ted has just been fired.

Original version	Italian dubbing
Boss: I'm sorry, but I have to let you go. Ted: What? Why? I mean, I've been <u>busting my ass</u> for this job for three years. [...] Jesus Christ!	<i>Boss: Mi dispiace, ma sono costretto a licenziarti.</i> <i>Ted: Cosa? Perché? Mi sto <u>facendo un mazzzo così</u> da tre anni. [...] <u>Porca pupazza!</u></i>  Back translation: [Boss: I'm sorry, but I have to fire you. Ted: What? Why? I've been <u>knocking myself out (literally: I've been doing my buttocks so)</u> for three years. [...] <u>Filthy puppet!</u> ]

Table 6. *Ted 2* (2015)

After explaining the meaning of “busting my ass” to the students, it was evident that *facendo un mazzzo così* was a downtoner, as *mazzzo* is a word of Neapolitan origin meaning “buttocks”. Nonetheless, the students agreed that the expression

uttered in the film is still frequently used in colloquial Italian. What the participants also clearly noticed was the reference to Jesus Christ, which was censored and rendered as *porca pupazza*. The next instance, however, was more adherent to the original language style (Table 7).

Context: Ted has asked a friend to father his child. As his friend answered negatively, Ted is upset.

Original version	Italian dubbing
<p>Ted: I can't believe it. That <u>son of a bitch!</u>                      Johnny: That was very selfish of him.                      Ted: I know, after I've watched his <u>piece of shit</u> movie like a hundred times. <u>Goddamn it!</u>                      [Ted throws a stone and accidentally hits his friend's car]                      Johnny: Oh, <u>shit!</u></p>	<p><i>Ted: Non ci credo, figlio di puttana!</i>  <i>Johnny: È stato proprio un grande egoista.</i>  <i>Ted: Sì, dopo che io ho guardato quel suo film di merda un centinaio di volte. V'affanculo!</i>  <i>Johnny: Oh, cazzo!</i></p> <p>Back translation:                      [Ted: I can't believe it, <u>son of a bitch!</u>                      Johnny: He was very selfish.                      Ted: Yes, after I've seen his <u>shitty</u> movie hundreds of times. <u>Fuck him!</u>                      Johnny: Oh, <u>fuck</u> (literally: <u>dick/bollocks</u>)!]</p>

Table 7. *Ted 2* (2015)

The participants agreed that the Italian dubbing was adherent to the dialogue of the original version. Obviously, some non-literal translations were applied (as in the case of “goddamn it”). However, the rendering was effective and sounded natural. The participants were of the opinion that in *Ted* (2012) and *Ted 2* (2015) (Seth MacFarlane) the gravity of the curse language was rendered successfully. Also, the words chosen were appropriate because they sounded authentic and natural. In practice, they did not pertain to any form of “dubbese” (Pavesi and Malinverno, 2000, pp.77–78; Pavesi, 2009).

After watching the excerpts, the participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire via Google Modules.

### 5. *The Questionnaire*

All questions are reported in Appendix 1. In this section, the major findings are discussed.

In question number 1, the students marked the lesson content quality from 1 (minimum) to 5 (maximum). Figure 1 reports their markings.

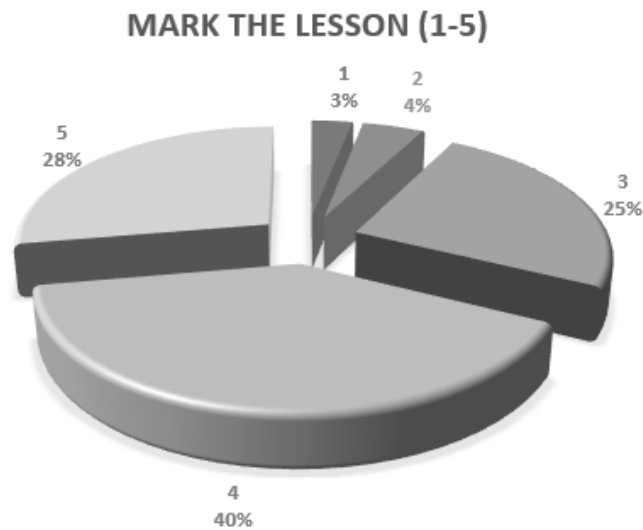


Figure 1. The apprentices marking the lesson

As can be seen, most of the participants marked either “4” (40%) or “5” (28%). One quarter (25%) marked “3”; whereas a very low number marked “2” (4%, corresponding to 3 participants) or “1” (3%; 2 participants).

The participants who marked “2” or “1” stated that the topic was not interesting (3 participants), not relevant to their job (one participant), or that they could not follow all dialogues entirely due to their low level of English knowledge (one participant). We will revert to the “unsatisfied” participants in a later section.

In question number 2 (Figure 2), the participants ticked one or more words describing the webinar. The words provided were the following: “interesting”, “stimulating”, “useful for second language rehearsal/learning”, “enjoyable”, “a bit boring”, “complicated”, and “of little use”. Any other adjective or word could be added to the list. Figure 2 reports their opinions.



Figure 2. The participants describing the webinar with one or more words

Most participants (48%) stated that the lesson was interesting. They also found it engaging (20%); “light” (in the sense of “uncomplicated”) (11%); new (meaning “non-conventional”) (9%); stimulating (6%); enjoyable (6%), and useful for L2 rehearsal or learning (5%). As partly anticipated above, some others were not completely satisfied; hence, they wrote negative comments, such as “of little use or meaning” (6%); “complicated” (3%) and “a bit boring” (3%). It is evident that the negative scores were far fewer than the positive ones. Furthermore, technical issues (such as a slow Internet connection) might have affected the actual participation of some students.

Question 3 asked to state what the participants would have changed in the lesson (Figure 3).

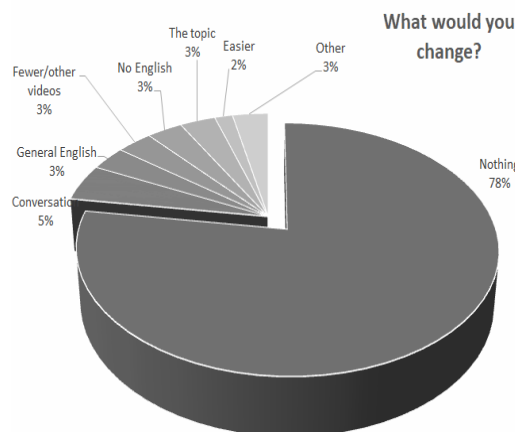


Figure 3. The participants answering the question “What would you change in the lesson?”

In question 3, most participants (78%) stated that they would have not changed anything. The remaining answers were rather scattered. For example, some asserted that they would have preferred a conversation lesson (5%), or a lesson on general English (3%). Some would have liked no English lessons at all during their apprenticeship training (3%); whereas others asked for fewer (or different) video excerpts (3%), or for an easier lesson (2%). As can be seen, the comments were varied, but most importantly, almost 80% of the students were completely satisfied with the content and the way the webinar was carried out.

Question number 4 asked the participants if their knowledge of English allowed them to follow the lesson. Figure 4 highlights the results.

**Did your English knowledge allow you to follow?**

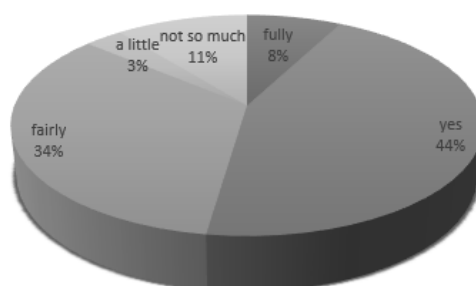


Figure 4. Asking the participants if their L2 knowledge allowed them to follow the lesson



As can be seen, the majority of the participants replied positively (44% answered “yes” and 8% “fully”). Some could follow the dialogues fairly well (34%); others a little (3%), whereas others “not so much” (11%). In these cases, the reason for the negative answers was probably due to the fact that, despite having film sequences scripted and subtitled, students had trouble in following some dialogues as the characters spoke relatively fast. For this reason, some film sequences were watched more than once. Also, technical issues (e.g., the Internet connection; the participants’ audio output, etc.) might have affected the possibility to follow the film dialogues.

Question 5 asked whether the participants felt engaged in the lesson despite the online mode (Figure 5).

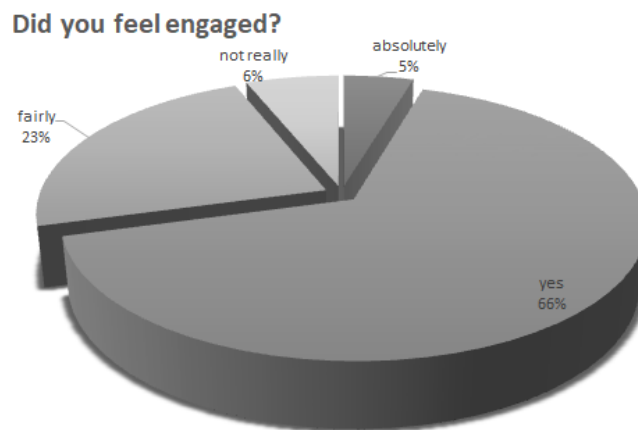


Figure 5. Participants answering whether they felt engaged in the online lesson

As can be seen, more than half of the participants felt engaged in the lesson, as 66% answered “yes” and 5% “absolutely”. Less than a quarter (23%) replied “fairly” and a low percentage answered “not really” (6%). What is peculiar, however, is that most participants who marked the workshop very low (i.e., “1” or 2” in Question 1 above) answered “fairly” (two, 3%), or even “yes” (two, 3%), and only one (1.5%) marked “not really”. Probably, they marked the lesson down as they felt it was not in line with their course of study or vocational experience (as one participant declared). The other students who answered “not really” to Question 5 marked the workshop “3” in Question 1. Probably, they gave a higher mark to Question 1 in view of other factors, such as the fact that they felt they had learnt or reviewed some vocabulary. These assumptions, however, remain at the level of speculation and further research would be

necessary in order to corroborate or confute them. It is likely that in a face-to-face lesson, it would have been easier to let the “weaker” students work together with the more advanced ones, in order to let them feel at ease and more engaged.

The last question asked the participants whether they felt their awareness of the second language increased; in practice, it asked what the participants thought they would “bring home” (Figure 6).

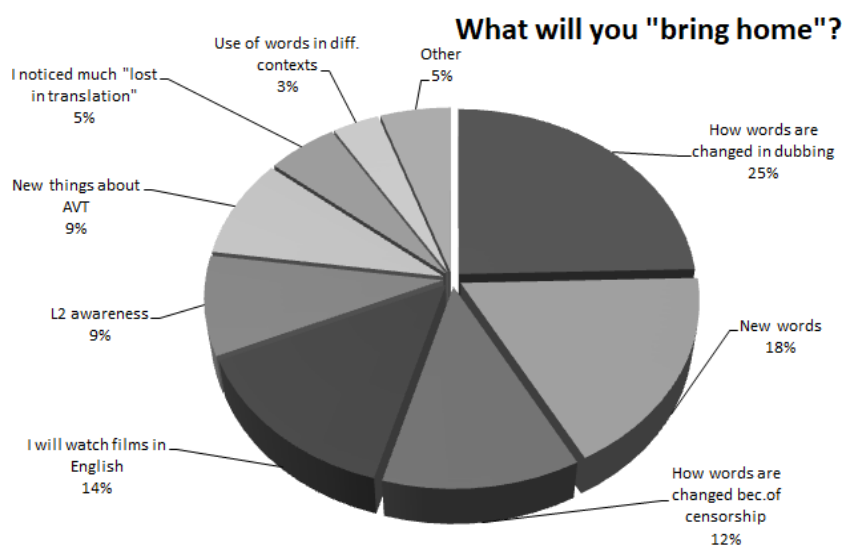


Figure 6. Asking participants what they would “bring home”

As can be seen, 25% of the participants stated that they understood how words are changed in dubbing or because of censorship (12%). Others declared that, thanks to the workshop, they learnt new words (either “bad” or “good”) (18%). Some asserted that they understood how important it is to watch films in the original language (14%), because much can be “lost in translation” (5%). Others declared that they learnt things about audiovisual translations they had not known before, or that they had the opportunity to rehearse and probably improve their L2 skills (9% each). A lower number of participants stated that they grasped how words can be used in different contexts (3%). The remaining ones had varied opinions such as original films are better than their dubbed versions, censorship has changed deeply over the years, or Americans swear much more than Italians (5% altogether).

Almost all the participants who initially rated the webinar low (three “2s” and two “1s” in Question 1) stated that they felt they learnt something from the lesson anyway (4 participants out of 5). Two of them, for example, understood that L2 words are often changed in dubbing; one grasped different word usages in different contexts, and another one asserted to have noticed new words, such as colloquial expressions and, obviously, taboo words.

### 6. Discussion

Given the figures reported above, the online lesson was perceived as interesting and enjoyable, and the participants had the impression to have learnt or grasped something.

As far as the dissatisfied participants are concerned, a few words could be spent on their initial marking. Although they gave three “2s” and two “1s” (Question 1), it can be argued that, to some extent, they benefited from the lesson as well as the other participants. Not only did some of them declare that the lesson was “interesting” (although, they said, “of little use”), but also they mostly felt engaged. As for the most satisfied participants, they declared that the lesson was very interesting and useful because *ha mostrato la realtà delle cose (...) che noi non vediamo in un film in Italiano* (“it showed how reality is (...) which we cannot see in an Italian film [version]”). Others stated that *è giusto comprendere quanto possiamo perdere per un’errata trasposizione di doppiaggio, non solo per il linguaggio esplicito ma anche per l’intonazione e l’intensità della frase* (“it is right to understand how much can get lost in a mistaken dubbing transposition, not only as far as explicit language is concerned, but also as regards intonation and the intensity of a phrase”).

Therefore, it is evident that the most engaged and motivated participants clearly went beyond the grasping of new words, but also perceived the nuances of authentic vs dubbed language dialogues.

In light of the above, it can be claimed that teaching the taboo language of original films in online ESL classes can be both useful and enjoyable. Even students who expressed reluctance may have probably raised their L2 awareness about taboo language. This is not uncommon in language learning and it is referred to as “implicit learning” (Ellis, 2009).

In light of the activities carried out and the answers to the questionnaires, it could also be speculated that some participants realized their L2 awareness at

the moment of filling in the questionnaire, whereas others might take longer to reach the same conclusion.

In a face-to-face lesson, it would have probably been wiser to let the students with a lesser knowledge of the target language work in pairs or in small groups with students with a higher level, to make them feel more engaged and, perhaps, motivated.

The weaknesses of this case study lie in the small amount of time dedicated to the film sequences. Little time was devoted to watching and analysing the excerpts because of the experimental nature of the lesson and the fact that not much strain could be put on the students, in view of their L2 knowledge. Future research could focus on repeated online lessons with a wider variety of films and/or L2 learners.

Another very important limitation is that this study is based on the students' perceptions. Also, from a scientific point of view, the learning outcomes were not assessed and more elaborate studies could be conducted to explore this aspect in the future.

### *7. Conclusions*

This paper has attempted to verify whether exposing L2 learners to film sequences containing taboo words can be both enjoyable and pedagogically sound. To this aim, several 2-hour webinars tackling the taboo words of film dialogues were organised. The participants were students (apprentices) with a secondary school diploma.

The students took part in the lesson quite actively; some participated extensively, others less "emotionally" due to a weaker L2 knowledge or technical issues during the sequence projection.

What was relevant about the questionnaire answers was the fact that even the participants who rated the workshop poorly (i.e. "1" or "2" in question no. 1) replied positively to the last question ("What will you bring home?") and stated that they understood how words are changed in dubbing, or how words can be used in different contexts. One participant admitted recognising new words in English. Hence, it could be argued that all participants probably raised their interest in L2, or at least noticed new L2 features.

In light of the above, the findings of this paper highlight that exposing L2 learners to taboo language from film sequences can be enjoyable, stimulating, engaging and interesting. This trial observation study cannot prove, of course, that L2 learning took place, but it can assert that, as long as the participants' interest was raised and they felt stimulated, the language experience was enjoyable, and they will probably remember something.

Future empirical and/or experimental studies are needed to corroborate the initial findings after this very preliminary learning experience involving exposure to L2 taboo language. Further research could also explore whether, if exposed to film sequences over an extended period of time, L2 learners can effectively improve language skills and proficiency. To do this, linguistic-related tests should be carried out.

#### References

- Allan, K. and Burrige, K. (2006) *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Andang, K. and Bram, B. (2018) 'Swear words and their implications for English language learning-teaching.' *LLT Journal: A Journal on Language and Language Teaching*, 21, pp. 43-49.
- Ávila-Cabrera, J. J. (2015) 'An Account of the Subtitling of Offensive and Taboo Language in Tarantino's Screenplays.' *Sendeban*, 26, pp. 37-56.
- Ávila-Cabrera, J. J. (2016) 'The subtitling of offensive and taboo language into Spanish of Inglourious Basterds: A case study'. *Babel: Revue internationale de la traduction*, 62(2), pp. 211-232.
- Ávila-Cabrera, J. J. and y Rodríguez-Arancón, P. (2018) 'The OffTaTled project: OFFensive and TABoo Exchanges SubtiTLED by online university students'. *Encuentro: Revista de Investigación e Innovación en la clase de idiomas*, 27, pp. 204-219. <http://www3.uah.es/encuentrojournal/index.php/encuentro/article/view/15> [Accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2022]
- Bardazzi, C. (2014) *Formazione per gli apprendisti: perché è noiosa*. Available at: [http://nuvola.corriere.it/2014/05/03/quale-formazione-per-gli-apprendisti/?refresh\\_ce-cp](http://nuvola.corriere.it/2014/05/03/quale-formazione-per-gli-apprendisti/?refresh_ce-cp) [Accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2022]
- Bolaños-García-Escribano, A., Díaz-Cintas, J. and Massidda, S. (2021) 'Latest advancements in audiovisual translation education.' *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer*, 15:1, pp. 1-12.

- Byrnes, P. (2014) *Well, I swear: A brief--ing history of profanity in the movies*. Available at <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/well-i-swear-a-brief-fing-history-of-profanity-in-the-movies-20140901-10axdu.html> [Accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2022]
- Cressman, Dale L., Callister, M., Robinson, T. and Near, C. (2009) 'Swearing in the cinema. An analysis of profanity in US teen-oriented movies, 1980–2006.' *Journal of Children and Media*, 3(2), pp. 117-135.
- Colbeck, K. L. and Bowers, J. S. (2012) 'Blinded by taboo words in L1 but not L2.' *Emotion*, 12(2), pp. 217-222.
- Cook, V. (2016) *Second Language Learning and Language Teaching: Fifth Edition*. New York: Routledge.
- Dewaele, J. M. (2004) 'The Emotional Force of Swearwords and Taboo Words in the Speech of Multilinguals.' *Journal of multilingual and multicultural development*, 25(2&3), pp. 204-222.
- Díaz-Cintas, J. (2012) 'Los subtítulos y la subtitulación en la clase de lengua extranjera.' *Abejace*, 2(3), pp. 95-114.
- Donaghy, K. (2014) *How can film help you teach or learn English?* <https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/how-can-film-help-you-teach-or-learn-english>. [Accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2022]
- Ellis, R. (2005) 'Principles of instructed language learning.' *System*, 33, pp. 209-224.
- Ellis, R. (2009) 'Implicit and Explicit Learning, Knowledge and Instruction.' In Ellis, R., Loewen, S., Elder, C., Reinders, H., Erlam, R. and Philp J. (eds.) *Implicit and Explicit Knowledge in Second Language Learning, Testing and Teaching*. Bristol / Buffalo / Toronto: Multilingual Matters, pp. 3-25.
- Filmer, D. A. (2011) *Translating Racial Slurs: A Comparative Analysis of Gran Torino Assessing Transfer of Offensive Language between English and Italian*. Durham theses, Durham University. Available at Durham E-Theses [Online] <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/3337/> [Accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2022]
- Finn, E. (2017) 'Swearing: The good, the bad & the ugly.' *ORTESOL Journal*, 34, pp. 17-26.
- Giampieri, P. (2017a) 'Are dubbed teen films (still) censored?' *Studies about languages*, 31, pp. 52-70.
- Giampieri, P. (2017b) 'Racial slurs in Italian film dubbing.' *Translation and translanguaging in multilingual contexts – TTMC*, 3(2), pp. 254-269,
- Giampieri, P. (2017c) 'Taboo language and censorship in the Italian dubbing of Ted 2.' *Lingue e Cultura dei Media*, 1(2), pp. 64-88.
- Giampieri, P. (2018a) 'Holy Gee: blasphemies and insults against religious figures in Italian film dubbing.' *Lingue e Cultura dei Media*, 2(2), pp. 96-114.

- Giampieri, P. (2018b) 'Learning AVT through ESL: a case study.' *Studies about languages*, 33, pp. 33-42.
- Giampieri, P. (2018c) 'Spoken language features (and anomalies) in films for ESL classes.' *CercleS*, 8(2), pp. 399–425.
- Giampieri, P. (2019) 'The Small Words of Film Spoken Language for Second Language Learning.' *International Journal of Language, Translation and Intercultural Communication*, 8, pp. 110-127.
- Giampieri, P. (2020) 'Drop the F-Bomb': A diachronic analysis of taboo language in Italian film dubbing.' *EXPRESSIO*, 4, pp. 259-290.
- Gilmore, A. (2010) 'Exploiting film discourse in the foreign language classroom.' In Mishan, F. and Chambers A. (eds.), *Perspectives on language learning materials development*. Oxford: Peter Lang AG, pp. 110–148.
- Herrero, C. and Vanderschelden I. (2019) *Using Film and Media in the Language Classroom: Reflections on Research-led Teaching*. London: Multilingual Matters.
- Horan G. (2013) "You taught me language; and my profit on't/Is, I know how to curse": cursing and swearing in foreign language learning.' *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 13(3), pp. 283-297.
- Irwin, G. (2019) 'Swearing in a Second Language.' *Masters Thesis*. Available at <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/theses/930> [Accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2022]
- Jay, T. (2000) *Why we curse. A neuro-psycho-social-theory of speech*. Philadelphia and Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Jay, T. and Janschewitz, K. (2008) 'The Pragmatics of swearing.' *Journal of Politeness Research*, 4, pp. 267 – 288.
- Kermode, M. (2014) *Ken Loach: "What I've always tried to do is capture the truth of the moment"*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/may/11/ken-loach-capture-truth-moment-jimmys-hall-readers-questions> [Accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2022]
- Maley, A. and Tomlinson, B. (2017) *Authenticity in Materials Development for Language Learning*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Marcus, A. E. (1979) 'Broadcasting Seven Dirty Words: FCC v. Pacifica Foundation.' *Boston College Law Review* 975, 20(5), pp. 975- 1002.
- Mercury, R. E. (1995) 'Swearing: A "Bad" Part of Language; A Good Part of Language Learning.' *TESL Canada journal / Revue TESL du Canada*, 13(1), pp. 28-36.
- McLoughlin L. I., Lertola J. and Talaván, N. (2020) *Audiovisual Translation in Applied Linguistics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Mottram, J. (2010) *Mike leigh – secrets and leigh lines*. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/mike-leigh-secrets-and-leigh-lines-2119219.html> [Accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2022]

- Nunan, D. (2013) *Learner-centered English Language Education: The Selected Works of David Nunan*. New York / London: Routledge.
- OfCome Office of Communications, 2016. *Attitudes to potentially offensive language and gestures on TV and radio - Research report*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand/tv-research/offensive-language-2016> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2022]
- Parisi, L. L. and Andon, N. (2016) 'The use of film-based material for an adult English language course in Brazil.' *Trabalhos em Linguística Aplicada*, 55(1), pp. 101-128.
- Pavesi, M. and Malinverno A. L. (2000) 'Uso del turpiloquio nella traduzione filmica.' In Taylor, C. (ed.) *Tradurre il cinema. Atti Convegno (Trieste, 29-30 Novembre 1996)* Trieste: Edizioni Università di Trieste, pp. 75-90.
- Pavesi, M. (2009) 'Pronouns in film dubbing and the dynamics of audiovisual communication.' *VLAL*, 6, pp. 89-107.
- Ravotti, P. (2014) 'L'esperienza dell'apprendistato.' *Forum Formazione*. Available at: [www.forumformazione.net/esperienza.doc](http://www.forumformazione.net/esperienza.doc) [Accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2022]
- Sherman, J. (2003) *Using authentic video in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Soprano, C. (2013) *L'apprendista che non apprende (nonostante la legge)*. Available at: <http://nuvola.corriere.it/2013/12/11/la-storia-emblematica-di-antonio-e-l-apprendista-che-non-apprende/> [Accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2022]
- Sullivan, J. (2010) *Seven Dirty Words: The Life and Crimes of George Caim*. Boston: De Capo Press.
- Synovate Ltd. (2010) *Audience attitudes towards offensive language on television and radio*. [Online], Available at: [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0017/27260/offensive-lang.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0017/27260/offensive-lang.pdf) [Accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2022]
- Swarztrauber E. and Pai A. (2018) *FCC (Federal Communications Commission) podcast*. Available at <https://www.fcc.gov/news-events/podcast/introduction> [Accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2022]
- Talaván, N. (2013) *La subtitulación en el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras*. Barcelona: Octaedro
- Tomlinson, B. (2011) *Materials Development in Language Teaching – Second Edition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tartamella, V. (2009) 'Il 'volgarometro': un questionario per valutare la forza offensiva delle parolacce.' *Les insultes : bilan et perspectives, théorie et actions. Collection Lan-guages*. Université Savoie Mont Blanc, 17, pp. 113-138.
- Valdeón, R. A. (2020) 'Swearing and the vulgarization hypothesis in Spanish audiovisual translation.' *Journal of Pragmatics*, 155, pp. 261-272.
- Wardhaugh, R. (2006) *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (Fifth edition) Malden/Oxford/Carlton: Blackwall Publishing.



- Zabalbeascoa P., Sokoli S., Torres O. (2012) *Conceptual framework and pedagogical methodology*. Available at <http://hdl.handle.net/10230/22701> [Accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2022]
- Zanotti S. (2012) 'Censorship or Profit? The Manipulation of Dialogue in Dubbed Youth Films.' *Meta: Translators' Journal*, 57(2), pp. 351-368.

*Film List*

- Gone with The Wind* (1939), Victor Fleming (USA), produced by David O. Selznick of Selznick International Pictures.
- The Gauntlet* (1977), Clint Eastwood (USA), produced by Robert Daley.
- Gran Torino* (2008), Clint Eastwood (USA), produced by Village Roadshow Pictures, Media Magik Entertainment and Malpaso Productions.
- Ted* (2012), Seth MacFarlane (USA), produced by Scott Stuber, Seth MacFarlane, John Jacobs and Jason Clark.
- Ted 2* (2015), Seth MacFarlane (USA), produced by Scott Stuber, Seth MacFarlane, Jason Clark and John Jacobs.
- Who's your Daddy* (2004), Andy Fickman (USA), produced by Jyrki Tuovinen.

*Appendix. The questionnaire*

Original language	Back translations
<p>1. <i>Dai un voto alla lezione da 1 (minimo) a 5 (massimo):</i></p> <p>2. <i>La lezione è stata... (metti una spunta ad una o più parole):</i>  <i>-interessante</i>  <i>-stimolante</i>  <i>-utile per ripasso/ apprendimento linguistico</i>  <i>-divertente</i>  <i>-un po' noiosa</i>  <i>-complessa</i>  <i>-di poca utilità</i>  <i>-altro (specificare)</i></p> <p>3. <i>Cosa cambieresti nella lezione?</i></p> <p>4. <i>La tua conoscenza pregressa dell'Inglese ti ha permesso di seguire/partecipare?</i></p> <p>5. <i>Ti sei sentito coinvolto/a?</i></p> <p>6. <i>Cosa ti è piaciuto di più della lezione e/o cosa ricorderai?</i></p>	<p>1. Mark the lesson from 1 (minimum) to 5 (maximum):</p> <p>2. The lesson was... (tick one or more words)            - Interesting            - Stimulating            - Useful for L2 rehearsal/learning            - Enjoyable            - A bit boring            - Complicated            - Of little use            - Other (specify)</p> <p>3. What would you change in the lesson?</p> <p>4. Did your level of English knowledge allow you to follow/participate in the lesson?</p> <p>5. Did you feel engaged in the lesson?</p> <p>6. What did you enjoy the most about the lesson and/or what will you remember about it?</p>